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The Parent-Teacher Connection -- How to Achieve It

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Abstract

A teacher needs to make a conscious effort to get parents involved in their child's education. To gain such parental involvement, the teacher must first establish open communication lines. After this, the teacher can encourage parents to become active partners in education by providing workshops; asking parents to serve on committees; and asking them to become school volunteers. Even parents who are unable to become involved during school hours may show their interest by helping with home learning activities prepared by the teacher.

The Parent/Teacher Connection: How to Achieve It

Introduction

When one becomes a teacher, it quickly becomes apparent that the task at hand is almost overwhelming. While content knowledge and excellence of methodology are important components of being a quality teacher, the ability to deal with many social, economic, physical, and psychological factors has become equally important. Certainly the role of the classroom teacher is one of great responsibility.

So how does one cope with such pressure? Naturally, being knowledgeable, wise, concerned, and competent will help. Another way to deal with the magnanimous task of being a teacher is to utilize parents to help promote what is being done in the classroom.

Rutherford and Edgar (1979) have said that a teacher is responsible for getting parents involved in

the education of their child. While their viewpoint might seem idealistic, following are some ideas teachers can use to promote a partnership between the home and school. These suggestions come from many different school districts; some methods require skill knowledge (e.g., helping with certain assignments or helping to improve reading/math skills), and others require only displaying an interest in what the child is achieving.

Communication

Communication is of utmost importance in attaining parent participation. Communicating with the parents opens the channels for dissemination of information and lets parents know the teacher's goals for the class. Teachers can provide communication in numerous ways, such as newsletters explaining events in the classroom, a class booklet explaining a typical day in the classroom, or group meetings to deliver and discuss information. Some schools use the

radio, television, and the local newspaper to keep parents informed of their objectives and needs, (Epstein, 1987). While conferences are a good way to transmit information on an individual basis, phone conferences may be more practical when work schedules do not allow face to face appointments.

Another way to communicate with parents is by taping messages to them. Chapman and Heward (1982) discuss the positive responses that came from recorded phone messages for learning disabled children ages eight to ten. In this study, parents simply called a telephone number and got information about homework assignments or nonacademic needs (e.g., a request for the child to bring a spoon to school). Chapman and Heward included spelling words in their messages and found that the subjects' spelling scores improved.

Henderson, Marburger and Ooms (1987) synthesized the concept of the school/home partnership by saying

there must be two-way communication with parents, and that communication must be clear and frequent.

Workshops

Presenting parenting workshops can provide important information to parents. A program using workshops effectively was developed in Public School 138 in the Bedford-Styvesant area of New York City. To help parents overcome mistrust or apathy toward teachers. The teachers in the district felt this could be achieved only if the school became part of the parents' lives. Workshops on curriculum were planned with most topics selected by the parents, and activity workshops were developed. In addition to gaining parental involvement, the workshops had an important secondary effect: the children whose parents were in the program made greater improvement in achievement test scores than did those children whose parents had remained detached (Newman, 1971).

Parenting workshops can encourage parents to read books on child development and parenting skills. Parents can learn of the benefits of reading to their child, listening to their child read, and building a library. Parenting workshops are a prime time to discuss questions regarding reading skills, creative play, or any other pertinent topic. At such workshops parents can be given ideas for creating educational games and activities (Truby, 1979). Television programs can be discussed, and parents can be given practical ways of linking the programs to basic reading, writing, and following direction skills (Potter, 1979). Parents can also be provided with ideas of educationally beneficial places to take their child in the community. During the workshops, many notions about the educator's teaching style/philosophy can be clarified before they become misconceptions (e.g., if a teacher doesn't circle every word that is misspelled or every sentence that is grammatically

incorrect, explaining why can clarify misunderstandings about his/her policy.)

In a study by the Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development (1984), it was determined that approximately 85% of parents claim to help their child with homework for 15 or more minutes a day. A surprising 80% said they would be glad to spend more time if shown how to perform specific learning tasks. When developed with the needs of the parents in mind, workshops can provide such information.

Committees and Organizations

Parents can be invited to serve on school or system wide committees, thus indicating to them that teachers value their input. Teachers should talk with parents personally and encourage them to become active in school activities. Remember: Involved people tend to be the school's and the teacher's biggest supporters.

Taking part in the parent-teacher organization can help parents become aware of the school programs. But... this organization will only be as involved as the two groups it represents: teachers must also support the organization.

Volunteer Program

Getting parents to volunteer is an effective way to directly involve them in school programs. Parents who volunteer can do many positive things for children, but they must be made to realize that professional behavior is essential. No private information should be discussed with anyone other than the teacher or principal.

What can school volunteers do to help in the academic program?

1. Listen to one child read.
2. Listen to a small group of children read.

3. Reinforce skills by playing reading/math/science games with a small group of children.
4. Work on specific skills with children who need the help (e.g., phonics, multiplication facts, etc.).
5. Check worksheets.
6. Make games that reinforce skills.
7. Record language experience stories.
8. Tutor.

If parents are unable to come to school, they might participate at home by making a bulletin board, preparing a game, or taping stories.

Home Learning Activities

Another way to get parents involved is through the use of home learning activities. Such activities can be developed and disseminated as part of a structured, school-wide program or by an interested individual teacher. These activities sheets can

encourage the development of language skills, reinforce reading and math skills, or simply provide family enjoyment and learning. There may be activity sheets with: questions on a television show; recipes for unique foods; a math game; an interesting story; or experiments.

In a the Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development's, 1984 study, it was found that the teachers who frequently got parents involved with the child's learning while at home were rated high in teaching skills and interpersonal communications. Those parents involved with home learning activities said they received more ideas from teachers, knew more teachers, knew more about the school's programs, and were more cognizant of the teacher's efforts.

Conclusions

It is the teacher who is in the ideal position to get parents involved in the school program -- either at home or at school. By actively communicating with parents, educating them through workshops, and providing them various means to get involved, the best learning opportunities are created for their child. And, afterall, isn't that each teacher's goal?

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